

1 Cor 7:25-40 “Resurrection and the Body 5: You Don’t Have to Get Married” May 18, 2014
Proverbs 27
Psalm 39

Proverbs 27 reminds us of the way of wisdom:

“Better is open rebuke than hidden love.
Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy.”

We need wise and faithful friends who will be willing to rebuke us.

Our Psalm of response is Psalm 39.

In Psalm 39 we ask God to “make me know my end
and what is the measure of my days;
let me know how fleeting I am!” (v4)

Psalm 39
1 Corinthians 7

I can see why preaching Paul’s message from 1 Corinthians 7
would have resulted in the early Christian monastic movement.

Paul values *singleness* more than we do –
which should question our preoccupation with getting married!

But I can also see why preaching Paul’s message from 1 Corinthians 7
would have resulted in the early Protestant rejection of monasticism!

Because Paul does not take kindly to those who would *forbid* people to marry.

Last week, Paul took us a little detour through matters of race and class,
now he returns again to gender, sex, and marriage.

We have a new category:

In verses 2-7, Paul spoke to married couples.
In verses 8-9, those separated or widowed.
In verses 10-11, those contemplating separation.
In verses 12-16, those married to unbelievers.
In verses 17-24, those seeking “improvement” in situation or status.

Now Paul speaks to the “betrothed.”

The word here is *parthenos* – which is frequently translated “virgin” –
but “virgin” in English doesn’t quite communicate the right idea here.
Paul is speaking to those who are of marriageable age, but have never married.

Why the ESV say “betrothed”?

Because in the Roman world – with marriages being arranged by parents –

the “never married” would almost certainly have been betrothed at a young age.

1. “The Time Is Short”: Living at the End of History (v25-31)

a. “The Present Distress” Hasn’t Ended Yet (v25-28a)

²⁵ *Now concerning the betrothed, I have no command from the Lord, but I give my judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy.*

In verses 25-28, Paul applies the same principles that he has been using to “status” seekers to the question of whether you should marry.

Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called.

Changing status is not a sin!

If a slave can obtain his freedom, great!

But do not obsess about it!

Make use of your present condition to love and serve the Lord Jesus who bought you!

That same principle drives Paul’s advice to the “betrothed.”

He admits, “I have no command from the Lord.”

Jesus never said what to do.

But he gives his opinion – “as one who by the Lord’s mercy is trustworthy.”

So what we have here is Paul’s God-inspired opinion!

How should we think about this?

First, notice that in verse 28, Paul says that if you don’t follow his opinion, you have not sinned.

This is *not* a command.

This is simply Paul’s opinion.

But second, that doesn’t mean that we can just ignore Paul’s opinion.

Because Paul is “one who by the Lord’s mercy is trustworthy.”

This opinion was inspired by God!

So how should we think about this?

Paul is telling us how singles should *think* about the prospect of getting married.

Namely, ‘it is good for a person to remain as he is.’

In verse 26, he takes the same principle that he had articulated in verses 17-24, and applies it to singles.

²⁶ *I think that in view of the present distress it is good for a person to remain as he is.* ²⁷ *Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife.* ²⁸ *But if you do marry, you have not sinned, and if a betrothed woman marries, she has not sinned.*

But what does Paul mean by “the present distress”?

It could also be translated “the impending distress.”

Some think that Paul is only speaking to some particular trouble
in *Corinth* at that particular time.
But there is nothing in the context of 1 Corinthians
that would explain why “the present distress” in Corinth
is any different from “the present distress” today (or at any other time in history).

After all, in verse 28, Paul says “those who marry will have worldly troubles” –
Has that changed?
In verse 29, Paul says “the appointed time has grown very short” –
If anything, it is shorter today than it was in Paul’s day!
In verse 31, he says “The present form of this world is passing away.”
All of these statements are made in order to help us think about how to live
in the midst of “the impending distress.”

The “present distress” or “impending distress” is not a temporary situation in Corinth.
You live with that impending distress upon you.
I find it fascinating that every generation seems to think that the present
is the worst time ever!
Some people look back to the Reformation and John Knox’s comment that Geneva
was “the most perfect school of Christ since the days of the apostles” –
but the reason why Knox said that
was because he thought that Scotland was a hopeless wreck!
John Owen, the great Puritan pastor,
thought that 17th century England was a wasteland of sin and misery.

The impending distress hangs over every generation –
because the next event in redemptive history is the return of Christ –
his coming again in glory to judge the living and the dead.

Paul’s opinion, then,
is that if you live in between the first and second coming of Christ
then you shouldn’t focus on changing your marital status.

Are you bound a wife (namely, are you betrothed by your parents)?
Don’t try to get out of it.
Are you free from a wife?
Don’t seek a wife!

Paul’s advice follows very closely Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount.
Jesus says in Matthew 6:25,
“Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life,
what you will eat or what you will drink,
nor about your body, what you will put on.”
Paul simply adds,
“nor about who (or whether) you will marry”!

Jesus had said:

“Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or
‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’
For the Gentiles seek after all these things,
and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all.
But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness,
and all these things will be added to you.” (Matt 6:31-33)

Food, drink, and clothing – these things are *necessities* of life.
And yet Jesus says don’t be anxious about these things.
Don’t be like the Gentiles who seek after all these things.

Paul has already drawn on this idea in 6:13-14 –

“Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food –
and God will destroy both one and the other.
The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body.
And God raised up the Lord and will also raise us up by his power.”

If Jesus said that we should be anxious about the *necessities* of life –
how much more should we not be anxious about lesser things!

So do not say,
‘Who shall I marry?’ or even ‘Should I get married?’
Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.

If you seek first a spouse, you may find one!
But with a spouse, you will also find trouble.

As Paul says at the end of verse 28:

b. Do Not Set Your Hearts on the Things of This World (v28b-31)

Yet those who marry will have worldly troubles, and I would spare you that.

Paul is not saying that getting married is sinful or wrong –
simply that those who marry will have worldly troubles!

As Carl Trueman said so well,

“All human marriages begin with joy but end in tragedy.
Whether it is divorce or death, the human bond of love is eventually torn apart.”

And there are all sorts of troubles that come with marriage.
If you get married, you will have troubles.
Your husband will sin against you more than anyone else!
Your wife will make your life miserable without even trying!

And that’s what makes Paul’s exhortation in verses 29-31 so challenging:

²⁹ *This is what I mean, brothers: the appointed time has grown very short. From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none,* ³⁰ *and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods,* ³¹ *and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away.*

When you hear the words, “this is what I mean,” your ears perk up –
and you think, “ah, good, Paul is going to be especially clear!” right?

But then Paul says, “let those who have wives live as though they had none.”
So why does it matter whether you get married or not?

Think about the first part of each of these items:

“those who have wives”

“those who mourn”

“those who rejoice”

“those who buy”

“those who deal with the world” (maybe better, “those who make use of the world”)

All of these things have to do with your “creational” labors.

Marriage, weeping and rejoicing, buying and using –
all these things are about our Genesis 1 calling –
“be fruitful and multiply – fill the earth and subdue it”

Sex and economics.

Marriage and business.

Tragedy and celebration.

Everyday life.

But Paul says that all of your creational labors need to be seen in the light of the new creation.

The appointed time has grown very short.

In the OT, it was clear that *many things* needed to happen before the end.

God still had to deal with humanity’s sin and rebellion.

Israel’s failure must be atoned for.

The appointed time was distant and the prophets didn’t know how long it would be.

But now, the appointed time has been shortened.

In the death and resurrection of Jesus, the final judgment has already happened to him –
and he was vindicated by the Father.

There is now a righteous man sitting at the right hand of the Father,
who will come to judge both the living and the dead.

So it is not *wrong* to have a wife – to mourn – to rejoice – to buy – to make use of the world!

No, all these things are *good things* –

but none of these things are *ultimate things*.

Do not be anxious about them.

Do not *seek them* – do not devote yourself to these things.

For the present form of this world is passing away.

The word here, *schema*, does not refer to physical structures,
but to the “fashion” the “manner” the characteristic properties of the world.
Paul is not saying that the physical universe is passing away,
rather, he is saying that the structures of society – this “way of life” –
is passing away.

So don't let your life be *governed* by this passing, fading way of life.

Life is hard – but remember the glory of Jesus!

Life is great – but don't forget the cross!

In other words, *Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness,
and all these things will be added to you.*

Except – there's one problem.

If you are married, you *will be* anxious about worldly things.

That's why Paul says in verses 32-34

2. Anxiety and Devotion: Marriage as a Divided Life (v32-35)

³² *I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord.* ³³ *But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife,* ³⁴ *and his interests are divided. And the unmarried or betrothed woman is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit. But the married woman is anxious about worldly things, how to please her husband.*

Marriage is a divided life.

The unmarried man (or woman) is anxious about the things of the Lord,
how to please the Lord.

But the married man is anxious about worldly things –
how to please his wife –

and the married woman seeks to please her husband.

Notice that Paul doesn't say that worldly things are bad.

If you are married, then you *will be* anxious about the things of the world.

Your interests are divided.

And Paul is not saying that this is sinful!

It's not a sin to have divided interests!

If a married man is going to *love God* –
then he *must* be anxious about the things of this world,
if he is going to express his love for God towards his wife!

I never really cared about money until I got married.

All of a sudden, I am now responsible for whether these eight people can eat!
The well-being of my wife.
The education of my children.
We've got mold in our basement.
We're going to need a new roof.
How long will that van last?

If I was single, I wouldn't worry about any of that!
But I'm married – so if I love God, then I must be concerned about these things.

Verse 29 – let those who have wives live as though they had none;
and yet, v33 – the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife.

You have to hold both of these together.

If you are single, then you have the ability to focus entirely on the things of the Lord.
So if you are fixated on pursuing marriage,
then you are wasting the time that God has given you
for your wholehearted pursuit of himself!

In verse 34, Paul says:

*And the unmarried or betrothed woman is anxious about the things of the Lord,
how to be holy in body and spirit.*

That's a really important way of saying it.

To be anxious about the things of the Lord means to focus on holiness.
It parallels Paul's admonition to men in verse 33, "how to please to the Lord."

How do you please the Lord?
Be holy in body and spirit.

As Paul had said,

"the body is not for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body."

If the body is for the Lord, and the Lord for the body,
then being holy in *body* and spirit is how you use your body for the Lord.

In our sexually charged culture, we can too easily forget this.

As an unmarried person, your body is for the Lord.
For the married person – your body is for the Lord as well!
But your interests are divided.

The single person is concerned simply with the question
of how to be holy in body and spirit.

Now, it's also important here to point out that Paul uses two different terms for singles:
"unmarried" and "betrothed."

The betrothed are the “never married” –
while the “unmarried” would be the “formerly married”
(either widowed or divorced).

Paul speaks to all singles and says in verse 35:

³⁵ I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord.

Remember that in v31, Paul talked about how the “present form of the world is passing away”?

The word for “present form” was “schema” (order)
Here in verse 35, the word “good order” is “euschemon.”

Since the order of this age is passing away,
Paul wishes to promote good order in the church –
so that he may secure their undivided devotion to the Lord.

The point is *not* that singles shouldn’t get married.
Rather, the point is that singles should be pursuing *Christ* whole-heartedly.
And if, in your pursuit of Christ, you happen to get married,
that's fine!

Our final section presupposes a different approach to marriage than we are accustomed to.

3. Marriage Is Good, Refraining from Marriage Is Better (v36-40)

a. In the Case of the Betrothed (v36-38)

³⁶ If anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly toward his betrothed, if his passions are strong, and it has to be, let him do as he wishes: let them marry—it is no sin. ³⁷ But whoever is firmly established in his heart, being under no necessity but having his desire under control, and has determined this in his heart, to keep her as his betrothed, he will do well. ³⁸ So then he who marries his betrothed does well, and he who refrains from marriage will do even better.

In verses 36-38, Paul is assuming the context of arranged marriages,
in which context the couple could be engaged for years,
waiting until they are old enough to marry.

Also, it’s important to recognize that Paul is dealing with a Corinthian church
that has some people in it who are pushing hard for something like a “spiritual marriage”
where the parties never have sex.

Paul has already said – if you are married, then you must fulfill your conjugal debt –
except for those mutually agreed upon times which you take for prayer and fasting (v5).
But if you are not *yet* married,
then Paul wants to make sure that no one is coerced into an uncongenial situation.

If you have an arranged marriage,

but you and your fiancée have “desire under control” –
then you don’t need to marry.
Why not say, “break the engagement”?
Because arranged marriages are usually designed as family alliances.
You may not have the ability to break the engagement
(without violating your responsibilities as a child to your parents).

Modern engagements are pretty much designed to get you to the wedding,
so most modern engagements don’t have the same economic entanglements
as in the Roman world.

In the modern world, it might be better to say that if a single man
is pursuing Christ whole-heartedly,
and you happen to find a Christian woman –
and the two of you would be better for the kingdom of God together –
then “let them marry – it is no sin.”

The one who married does well.
The one who does not marry does even better –
because the one who does not marry
is able to devote himself or herself, entirely to Christ.

b. In the Case of the Widow (v39-40)

³⁹ *A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord.* ⁴⁰ *Yet in my judgment she is happier if she remains as she is. And I think that I too have the Spirit of God.*

Verses 39-40 then turn to the case of the widow.
Paul’s basic principle is that a wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives.
The same is true for men – but Paul focuses on women in this section.

Paul says that widows are free to remarry – and that she may marry whom she wishes
(a point that Roman law affirmed) – “only in the Lord.”

If you are a young Christian woman in an unbelieving household in Paul’s day,
then you have very little control over who you will marry.
So Paul doesn’t address young people on the question of who to marry –
because Paul doesn’t think that young people will have much say in the matter!

But it’s worth comparing 1 Corinthians 7 with 1 Timothy 5,
in order to apply Paul’s teaching for us today.

In 1 Tim 5:9-16 Paul then turns to those widows who have no one else to care for them,
and he talks about “enrolling” these widows.

⁹*Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband,^[a] ¹⁰and having a reputation for good works: if she has brought up children, has shown hospitality, has washed the feet of the saints, has cared for the afflicted, and has devoted herself to every good work.*

Notice that the requirements parallel those for the bishop:

- wife of one husband
- reputation for good works
- has brought up children
- has shown hospitality
- has washed the feet of the saints
- has cared for the afflicted
- has devoted herself to every good work

In the same way that bishops and deacons should be exemplary Christians,
so also the order of widows is to consist of exemplary Christians as well.

And ladies – you can see here what Paul calls you to do:

- are you faithful to your husband?
- do you show hospitality? (love to strangers)
- do you care for the afflicted?
- do you devote yourself to every good work?

Not – “are you perfect?”

- But, “does your life reflect the mystery of godliness?
- the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus?”

It is this sort of woman who should be enrolled on the list of widows.

- I think that Paul would say that we should help other widows –
but we should not “enroll” them
as widows who are supported entirely by the church;
because Paul seems to have a particular vision
of what these widows are supposed to be doing.

And that is also why Paul has an age limit on the “order” of widow.

Verses 11-15 make clear that “enrolling” a widow puts her under some sort of obligation:

¹¹*But refuse to enroll younger widows, for when their passions draw them away from Christ, they desire to marry ¹²and so incur condemnation for having abandoned their former faith.*

Modern commentators are often eager to deny any connection to the rise of monastic practices,
but George Knight says that we should recognize what is there!

- Paul says that enrolling a widow includes the requirement that she will not marry again.
If a widow does enroll, and then later gets married,

Paul goes so far as to say, that her passions have drawn her away from Christ,
and she incurs condemnation – judgment – for having *abandoned* her former faith
As he puts it in verse 15,
this is nothing less than “straying after Satan”!

The “order of widow” plainly is not just a list of widows in need.
The “order of widow” includes a commitment on their part *not* to marry –
a vow – if you will –
that they will devote themselves to Christ and the service of the church.

Now, you can see that this is the root of the idea of the monastic vow.
But you can also see that Paul would be *furious* at the idea of *young people* taking this vow.

“Refuse to enroll younger widows!”

She may *think* that she is ready to devote herself to the service of Christ,
but she may not be enrolled.

Paul does not say that younger widows *must* marry.
His wording makes it clear that this is only his *preference*:

¹⁴So I would have younger widows marry, bear children, manage their households, and give the adversary no occasion for slander.

How do you bring this together with 1 Corinthians 7?
Paul wants to see single Christians single-minded in their pursuit of Christ.